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Rochelle Riley: Revolution in education won't be fast or easy

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It will look worse before it gets better.

As state and local officials work to remold Michigan's education landscape and guide students through a maelstrom of change, it initially might look like Gov. Rick Snyder's plans -- and Detroit Public Schools emergency manager Roy Roberts' plans -- aren't working.

But this is a race that goes to the strong, not the swift. So as the state changes education standards and seeks to close ineffective schools -- and as Roberts embraces efforts to get children out of failing schools -- it would be a mistake to try to measure success too quickly.

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New kind of proficient

State Superintendent Mike Flanagan said in an interview this week that he expects Michigan's school proficiency scores to drop considerably next year as the state uses new tests, new requirements and new standards.

"Let's say someone (running a school) is winking and calls something algebra, but it really isn't," he said. "It will show up on the ACT. If our students have consistent declining scores on the ACT, which we pay for, then parents should question the rigor."

Flanagan also said that, for the first time, Michigan has raised its reading levels.

"Before, when we said a kid was proficient, it meant that child could read enough to work at a factory," he said, adding that 90% of state schoolchildren were labeled proficient on that basis. Today, proficiency is about 60%.

"Now a third-grade reading proficiency is genuinely a way to predict that a kid is on track and will not need remediation at a community college," Flanagan said. "It is a lower number, but it is a realistic number. If they go to college, but have to have remediation, then the

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system hasn't helped this child."

If you can believe it, every Michigan leader didn't welcome these changes.

"I was getting beat up by a lot of the status quo-ers -- folks who say we'll look bad," Flanagan said. "It will be hard. It'll be a totally new story to USA TODAY next year. 'How did you drop from 90% proficient in third-grade reading to 60%?' It's the same results, but now you have to get more questions right. Are you on track to get to college? It's revolutionary."

Revolutionary.

Not a spectator sport

Revolutionary isn't a word used often enough where children and education are concerned.

Revolutionary is a word that isn't used often enough in Detroit.

But that is exactly what is happening as education gets more focus than it has in recent years, and thousands of parents choose education over politics in plotting their children's futures.

Revolution is exactly what needs to take place for Michigan to improve its unemployment numbers and regain its stature as a place where one can live and work and achieve.

Revolution needs to move in and make itself at home.

That said, I want to share two revolutionary ideas, neither new, neither mine.

One came from demographer Kurt Metzger, director of Data Driven Detroit, who knows that numbers don't lie.

"Detroit's school-age population -- that's where people are opting out" of the city, he said, adding that the largest population loss in Detroit from 2000-10 was families with children ages 5-14. Metzger suggested that DPS build and renovate schools in the neighborhoods with the most children, even if those children do not currently attend DPS.

"You want to have high-performing schools in those neighborhoods. Invest where kids are," he said. Those population pockets include southwest Detroit and northeast Detroit, at the eastern edge, above the Osborn community.

The other suggestion?

Tell elected leaders to stop pretending that the state's fate, that every city's fate, is not tied to its schools.

"Look at D.C.," Dan Lijana, spokesman for Detroit Mayor Dave Bing, said of the nation's capital. "That's where I used to live. They finally started making improvements (in the schools), and people are moving back. I think it's clear to the mayor and for the mayor that the education crisis is probably the single most important factor in bringing people back to the city, along with public safety, which plays a role in the education piece."

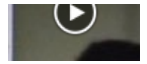
Revolution is not a spectator sport. It's time that we all joined.



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If some charter schools aren't working, demand change or shut them down. If some public schools aren't working, fix them or shut them down. If students are headed to college with an inability to read and a fake diploma, stop crowing about how many kids you sent to school without being able to read and with a fake diploma. When they get there, the colleges will know.

Oh wait, I have two more suggestions: Don't complain about a problem affecting children without offering a solution. And embrace the revolution.

For a while, it may not be pretty. But boy, will it be worth it.

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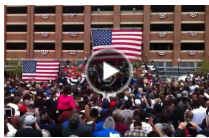
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